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R. Burns Romance

J. C. Ewing

MONDAY, JULY 26, 1920.

THE GLASGOW HERALD,



David Fyfe
looked at this
book on Mar. 26, 1971
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A BURNS ROMANCE

VICISSITUDES OF THE GLENRIDDELL MSS.

By J. C. EWING

When he moved from Mossgiel to Ellisland in the early summer of 1788, Robert Burns found as one of his neighbours Robert Riddell of Glenriddell, and in the printed record of the subsequent period of his career few names occur more frequently, and none is mentioned with greater respect, than that of Captain Riddell. Born in 1755, eldest son of Walter Riddell of Newhouse, Roxburghshire, and Anne Riddell, heiress of Glenriddell, Robert Riddell had spent some years in the Army, had in 1778 obtained a commission as lieutenant in the 83rd Regiment of Foot (the Glasgow Volunteers), had four years later been promoted captain in Elford's Corps, and on the disbandment of that regiment in 1783 had been placed on half-pay. When Burns came to Dumfriesshire, Riddell was residing in the new mansion-house of Friars' Carse, situated on the Nith, six miles above Dumfries, and built on the site of the picturesque old residence which is depicted in Grose's "Antiquities of Scotland." He was a man interested in literary and antiquarian matters, so keenly interested in archaeology, indeed, as to become a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London. To its meetings he made several communications, eight of which are printed in its "Archæologia," and to its library he presented a manuscript "Tour in Nithsdale," a folio volume of the greatest interest to Burnsians, since it holds, inter alia, the only known portrait of Riddell himself, a beautiful drawing in water-colours of the Friars' Carse, to which the poet was welcomed, and a poetical manuscript which bears to have been "wrote at Friars' Carse, June 21, 1792, by Robt. Burns." He became in 1791 a corresponding member of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester, in which city he had found his wife, Elizabeth Kennedy; was in 1792 elected an honorary member of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, to whose publications also he contributed; and in 1794 his reputation as "a gentleman of uncommon knowledge as an antiquarian" procured him the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws from the University of Edinburgh. For five successive years (1789-1793) he was a representative to the General

Assembly—a "high ruling elder" from the Presbytery of Dumfries; in politics, according to the tenant of Ellisland, he was "a Whig without a stain, a Whig in principle and grain."

A WARM FRIENDSHIP

That Riddell found the newcomer to Ellisland—as the newcomer found Riddell—a man that greatly interested him may be gathered from the records of their friendship which have survived: from their correspondence, from certain of Burns's poetical compositions, and from the manuscripts and the printed books presented by the poet to his patron. During the years 1788-1793 the two men spent much time together. Burns had the freedom of the grounds of Friars' Carse, and was a welcome and an honoured guest at the Riddells' house. "At their fireside," he wrote, "I have enjoyed more pleasant evenings than at all the houses of fashionable people in this country put together: and to their kindness and hospitality I am indebted for many of the happiest hours of my life." Elsewhere in his writings the poet has recorded high appreciation of Riddell, highest of all in the touching sonnet he wrote when Glenriddell died, still estranged from the poet over an incident at Woodley Park:—

"Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime,
Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer."

Riddell appears to have been a keen book-collector, and to have had a decided penchant for manuscripts. He bequeathed his library to his wife, who after his death removed to Edinburgh; and John Nichols, in his "Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century," records (1812) that the Glenriddell collection of books on antiquities was sold by auction in Scotland in 1795, one Robert Ross being the vendor. The exact place and date of the sale appears to be unknown, but there cannot be much doubt that an advertisement in the "Edinburgh Evening Courant" of March 5, 1795, of the sale by R. Ross of "a curious and valuable collection of books on antiquities, collected at a great expense by an eminent antiquary lately deceased," refers to the books that had been brought together at Friars' Carse.

In acknowledgment of Riddell's many kindnesses Burns gifted to him several printed books, among them one of his copies of Adam Smith's "Theory of Moral Sentiments," with an inscription in his hand:—

"Had I another friend more truly mine,
More lov'd, more trusted, this had ne'er been thine."

He also wrote in Riddell's interleaved copy of Johnson's "Scots Musical Museum" a series of learned notes on the text and the airs of that work. But the most valuable, as it is the most interesting, of his gifts to his patron

was one of the two volumes that have come to be known as the Glenriddell Burns manuscripts—the two volumes whose sale and purchase in 1913 created a sensation in Burns and other circles, and whose generous restoration to Scotland is being acknowledged by the presentation of an address to the donor, Mr John Gribbel, who has come from Philadelphia to be the guest of the Burns Federation at Glasgow.

HISTORY OF THE MANUSCRIPTS

The Glenriddell manuscripts of Burns's poetry and prose are comprised in two quarto volumes, each measuring about 11in. by 8in. Between them the volumes contain 82 compositions of the poet; and of their 247 pages of manuscript, no fewer than 175 are wholly in the holograph of Burns, the remainder being the work of two amanuenses. Both volumes are bound in calf, with the backs elaborately gold-tooled; and the volume of poetry has Riddell's coat of arms stamped in gold on the boards.

The earliest mention of these manuscripts is in one of the few letters from Burns to Riddell that are known to have survived—"If my poems which I have transcribed and mean still to transcribe into your book were equal to the grateful respect and high esteem I bear for the gentleman to whom I present them, they would be the finest poems in the language." This letter, which was first printed in Cromek's "Reliques of Burns" (1808), is undated, and gives no clue to the date at which the volume was begun; but the appearance of the "Ode to the departed Regency-bill, 1789," on pages 11-14 is proof that the work of transcription could not have been more than commenced in the spring of that year. So also the inclusion of the "Epistle to Robert Graham, Esq., of Fintry, 5th October, 1791," at pages 154-157 may be accepted as fixing approximately the date of completion of the transcribing, even though the "preface" be dated April 27, 1791. The collection was made at the request of Riddell, who doubtless supplied the volume of blank leaves and had the title-page prepared—"Poems written by Mr Robt. Burns and Selected by him from his unprinted Collection for Robert Riddell of Glenriddell, Esq." It may safely be conjectured that the volume was presented to him towards the end of year 1791, and we know that it was in his possession at the time of his death, which occurred on April 21, 1794, shortly after the incident which led to estrangement between Burns and the Riddells of Woodley Park and of Friars' Carse. "Uneasy for the fate of those manuscripts" after the death of his friend, Burns applied to Miss Kennedy, sister of Riddell's wife, requesting that Mrs Riddell might "have the goodness to destroy them or return them to me." The lady chose to return

the book to Burns; and he, at some subsequent date, added the nine epigrams and epitaphs which appear on pages 160-162, one of the nine (was it done deliberately?) being the four lines "Pinned to Mrs Walter Riddell's carriage."

To have a companion volume of letters was probably an afterthought of either Burns or Riddell. Like the earlier volume, the later was made at the request of Riddell, who no doubt again supplied the volume of blank leaves and had the title-page prepared—"Letters by Mr Burns, which he selected for R. Riddell, Esq., of Glenriddell." The earliest mention of this second volume in Burns's printed correspondence appears to be in a letter dated December 15-25, 1793, to Mrs Dunlop of Dunlop—"I have lately collected, for a friend's perusal, all my letters; I mean those which I first sketched, in a rough draught, and afterwards wrote out fair. On looking over some old musty papers which from time to time I had parcelled by as trash that were scarce worth preserving and which yet at the same time I did not care to destroy, I discovered many of these rude sketches, and have written and am writing them out in a bound MS. for my friend's library." ("How I envy that friend for whose library you plan such a decoration!" replied Mrs Dunlop.) Some months later (about May, 1794) he informed Peter Hill, bookseller in Edinburgh, that "I have been making a collection of all the blotted scrolls of any letters I have written . . . which I intended to have given to poor Glenriddell. Alas! he is gone! and in him a worthy Friend, both of yours and mine." And so the manuscript volume of his letters remained with Burns, to be joined by the other when returned to him by Mrs Riddell.

CURRIE FAMILY'S INTROMISSIONS

The two volumes of manuscripts were in the poet's possession at the time of his death on July 21, 1796, and formed part of the "huge and shapeless mass" of papers that was sent in January, 1797, by the trustees for Burns's family to Dr James Currie, of Liverpool. That gentleman had offered to write the "Life" of the poet, and, on the strength of that offer, had been adopted as biographer and editor of the volumes of his writings proposed to be published for the benefit of Mrs Burns and her five sons. "The manuscript book of letters is at Liverpool as an important part of the materials from which the future publication is to be selected," Gilbert Burns informed Mrs Dunlop on April 2, 1797; and certain writing on the two volumes show them to have passed through Currie's hands. It is undoubted that—along with the other "remains of poor Burns," as Currie spoke of the poet's manuscripts—they were retained by him when his editorial labours

were completed, and that at his death in 1805 they passed to his son, William Wallace Currie: proof is to be found in the correspondence relative to the editions of Burns's writings which is printed in certain numbers of the "Annual Burns Chronicle." Thus, in 1808, R. H. Cromek at Liverpool informed Cadell and Davies, publishers, that "the whole mass of the papers that form the Liverpool collection has been laid before me. Notwithstanding the labour and exertions of Dr Currie, yet it is almost incredible to think of the number of sterling first-rate productions still remaining buried in the pile." Other letters betray a strong reluctance on the part of the younger Currie to surrender the papers, even when requested to do so by Cadell and Davies, to whom they belonged; and so, their rightful owners not insisting on return, the "remains" continued in his hands, and at his death passed into possession of his widow. The private records—if extant—of a certain auction-room in London would probably throw considerable light on the lady's treatment of a large portion of the manuscripts which thus came to her; while the records of a private club in Liverpool show that in 1853 the same lady, assuming that the books were her property, presented to it the two volumes of manuscripts that had been prepared by Robert Burns for the laird of Friars' Carse sixty years before. In that club—the Athenæum—the volumes lay, practically unknown, for twenty years thereafter, until attention was drawn to them by the late Henry A. Bright, and they subsequently became better known through their contents being utilised by the more recent editors of Burns's writings. But it may be said with truth that Liverpool took little or no interest in these splendid manuscripts—even the official "History" of the Athenæum (1898) makes no mention of them—though it may be placed to the credit of the city that when, in 1903, an offer to purchase the manuscripts—for £5000, it is said—was made on behalf of the late J. Pierpont Morgan, the efforts of some of her leading citizens, supported by the press, caused the offer to be declined.

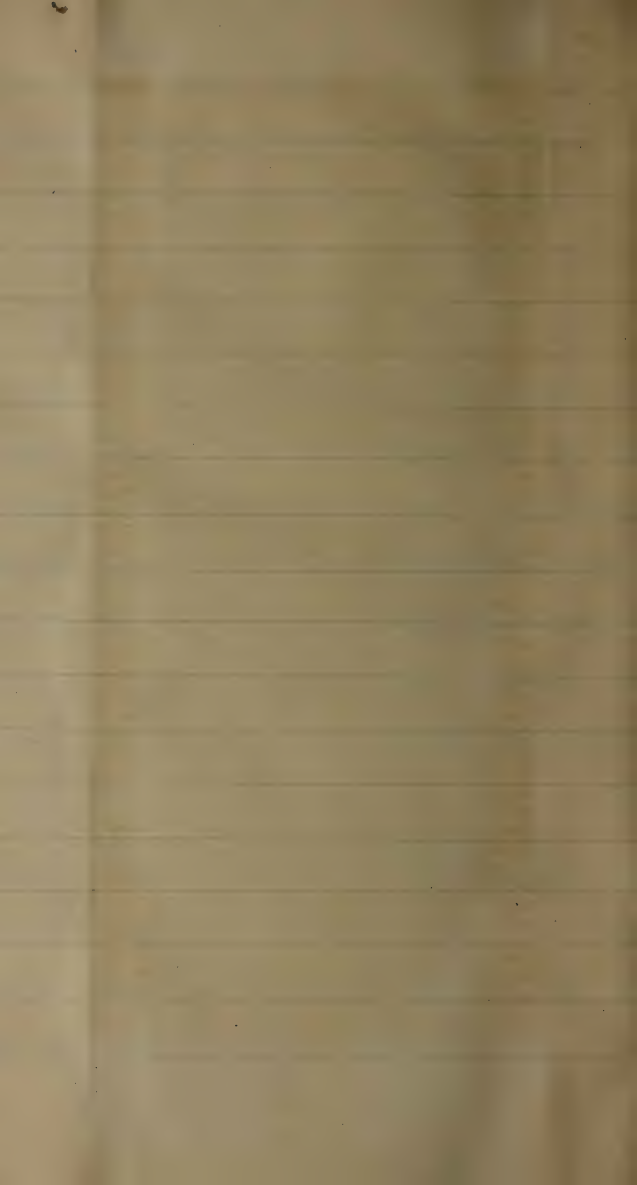
SALE AND RECOVERY

But the knowledge that they held a valuable property had come to the members of the Athenæum, and it was not unnaturally feared in Burns circles that an attempt would be made by some of their number to exploit that property to the pecuniary advantage of the club. Yet few dreamed that it would come so soon or so suddenly or in the form in which it did. Only nine years had passed since the proposal from America had been declined, when the proprietors of the Athenæum, at their annual meeting in January, 1913, re-

olved "that the committee be authorised to sell the Burns manuscripts in the possession of the Athenæum upon such terms and subject to such reserve price as the General Committee shall think proper, and that with the proceeds of the sale, less expenses, a special fund, to be called the Currie Memorial Fund, be formed to commemorate the name of the donor of the manuscripts and her family." (How better could "the name of the donor of the manuscripts and her family" have been commemorated than by retaining in the Athenæum the manuscripts which she had presented to it?) The annual meeting of 1913 was "very sparsely attended," and an amendment to refer the matter back to the committee was defeated by only five votes. So small was the majority in favour of the proposal that the minority assumed that nothing further would then be done in the matter; but those who had proposed a sale had learned something from the negotiations of 1903, and now worked with such secrecy that many even of their fellow-proprietors of the Athenæum were unaware that the sale of the Burns manuscripts was impending until the fact was announced by the "Liverpool Daily Post and Mercury" in its issue of July 22, 1913. The sale had been effected by private treaty through Messrs Sotheby, Wilkinson and Hodge, auctioneers, in London, the price paid to the Athenæum being £5000. Thus was singularly lost to Liverpool a collection of manuscripts which had been as singularly preserved within its gates. When presenting the volumes to the Athenæum Mrs W. W. Currie wrote that she would "feel gratified by their finding a place in the library of an institution in which Dr Currie took so great an interest." That letter clearly reveals her intention that the manuscripts should find a permanent home there; and, waiving the question of Mrs Currie's right to give away the manuscripts, their acceptance by the Liverpool Athenæum constituted a great and a unique public trust, a fact which a majority of the proprietors of the Athenæum in 1913 failed to appreciate.

AMERICANS' ATTITUDE

It soon transpired that Messrs Sotheby had disposed of the manuscripts to Joseph Hornstein, bookseller in Westminster, and that Hornstein's agent had taken them to the United States of America with the intention of offering them for sale privately. Among those to whom they were offered was Mr William K. Bixby, president of the Burns Club of St Louis, Mo., and a well-known collector, but Mr Bixby would have none of them: in his own words, "I had seen in the newspapers accounts of the sale of these Manuscripts by the Liverpool Athenæum and of the storm of condemnation from all Scotland. . . . The dealer said to me that the



collection had been consigned to him to get it away from England, and that it was for sale. I told him that for my own use I would as soon purchase the painting of Mona Lisa, which had been stolen recently from the Louvre, as I should feel that I had to apologise for having the collection in my possession." They were subsequently taken to Philadelphia, and offered to Mr John Gribbel, a prominent business man and collector in that city. Mr Gribbel "told him (Hornstein's agent) frankly, I would not give a shilling for them for my own possession, but there was a purpose for which I would consider them, and on this basis I entered into negotiations which ended in my purchase of them" on November 21, 1913. That purpose to which Mr Gribbel referred is stated in the "deed of trust" which he executed on September 10, 1914:—"I acquired the manuscripts in order that I might present them as a gift to the Scottish nation, to be deposited and to remain for ever in Scotland." In fulfilment of that intention, the two volumes were received from Mr Gribbel in August, 1914; and in terms of his direction that, pending the establishment of a Scottish National Library in which they shall be permanently preserved, the custody of the manuscripts should be entrusted "for a period of five years at a time alternately to the Corporation of Edinburgh and the Corporation of Glasgow, beginning with the former, with a view to the said manuscripts being exhibited to public view," they were housed in Edinburgh during the years 1914-1919. At the expiry of the first period of five years they were brought to Glasgow, and those that meet to honour the American gentleman who, with unparalleled generosity, purchased these manuscripts that he might restore them to Scotland, will have the satisfaction of seeing this unique relic of the great Poet of Humanity—a relic whose history reads like romance.

It remains to be added that the agitation initiated by the "Liverpool Daily Post and Mercury" and supported by the press throughout Scotland, with the prompt action of the Glasgow and District Burns Clubs Association—as evidenced in the remarks, quoted above, of Mr Bixby and Mr Gribbel—was the direct means of saving these precious manuscripts to Scotland.
